

Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Second Sunday of Advent – December 8, 2024

Wilderness Peace

Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6



Canyonlands, Utah (D. Baylor, 2013)

[Luke 3:1-6] *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

Every family has places and landscapes that figure prominently in their history. Places where the geography and the events that take place are completely bound together. For Midwest farming families, it could be the fertile plains cut through by a river with a tendency to flood. For Pacific Northwest Indigenous people, it could be the Salish Sea, whose contours and salmon habitats are tied to the stories of abundance and extinction of native tribes.

For the Christian family – our family that traces our origins back thousands of years to the Holy Land before the birth of Jesus – it is the desert wilderness. Powerful things happen in the wilderness – it is a place of refuge, testing, liberation, community-building, and revelation of the Divine.

Remember, after the Israelites are freed from the tyranny of Pharaoh, they live in the wilderness for 40 years, learning their truest identity and how to be in relationship with God. When the prophet Isaiah calls the people out of exile and back to covenant with God, he proclaims “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . . . Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will run and not grow

wearied.” Six centuries later, John the Baptist echoes these words to call the people to prepare for the coming of Christ: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.

Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness where he is tempted by fear and doubt and emerges with clarity and purpose. He returns to the wilderness to pray at critical points in his ministry. And through the centuries, from the desert fathers and mothers to monastic communities to modern pilgrims, the wilderness has beckoned to followers of Christ, because the wilderness is a powerful place, both physically and spiritually.

It is a wasteland, a place of stark beauty and isolation that brings a person face-to-face with the limits of their skills and endurance as well as the depth of their “shuddering dependence on God.”¹ The Jewish people knew the wilderness as a crucible, a place that refines a person’s spiritual strength and depth.

Our gospel today begins with the statement that while Tiberius and Pontius Pilate and Herod and Philip and Lysanias were all busy ruling in their civilized palaces, the word of God comes

¹ David Douglas, “A Way in the Wilderness: Men and the Environment.”

to John in the wilderness. When Luke writes this, he's not just providing context. He is reminding his listeners to not get distracted by the Roman overlords' transitory power; they must pay attention to the eternal wisdom that comes out of the wilderness.

The season of Advent has been likened to its own wilderness experience, a time to step back from the daily bustle and make space for self-reflection and attention to what's real. As days get colder and darkness grows, we become aware of our own smallness, our vulnerability, and our longing for warmth, light, love, and meaning.

Like the people who followed John the Baptist into the desert, we lean into this wilderness time to reflect on our lives, to recall encounters with God's grace, and to realize where we have fallen short, all so our hearts are prepared to become a holy dwelling place at Christmas. It is important spiritual work.

Time in the Advent wilderness can uncover essential restlessness, a sense of being off-center, disconnected from one's true self, an unease that exists alongside a deep longing for peace. Peace is a fundamental spiritual virtue – and an elusive one, too, because so often we associate it with what's happening outside of us rather than the condition of the heart within us.

The most common understanding of peace is the absence of conflict. A state of relationship between people or nations where disagreements are resolved through civil discourse rather than violence or threats. If we seek that kind of peace, we work to control differences, silence agitation, and smooth over problems to create a superficial placidity. We do that all the time in our families and in the larger public sphere.

But that is not God's peace. That's more like the Pax Romana of first century Palestine, where the Roman Empire's colonial expansion, economic prosperity, and tight control over the lower classes created an illusion of peace for the wealthy, ruling class. Violence wasn't eliminated, it was just exported to the edges of society, to the nameless ones whose compliance made the rule of people like Tiberius and Pontius Pilate and Herod possible. But God knows those names.

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the active presence of justice and mercy. This is what the ancient prophets call "righteousness" – when justice and mercy walk hand in hand. So spiritual peace includes the commitment to the well-being of every person, regardless of their history, power, or status. And even greater commitment to the well-being of those who are pushed to the edges

through poverty, lack of connection, or difference from cultural norms.

True peace is only possible with humility, the awareness of our own dignity and imperfections even when we'd rather focus on the shortcomings of our opponents. When you hear our political leaders talk about achieving peace, ask whether they mean the active presence of justice and mercy.

Today we lit the second candle of Advent, the candle for peace. It expresses our longing for the peace of God which passes all understanding, the peace that casts light in places of darkness or conflict. It is a prayer for justice and mercy in the world that begin in our own hearts.

So how do we cultivate this interior, active peace? Practice.

First, we practice awe and gratitude, noticing the beauty, resilience, and generosity of the world around us, cognizant that the nature of the Creator is evident in creation. We acknowledge our interconnectedness and dependence on the entire cosmos, and reverently give thanks and honor for its sustenance of our lives.

Second, we practice an unflinching look at the real. We engage in the Ignatian prayer of examen, trusting that the Spirit is at work in the small details of our daily lives. At the end of the day, try taking five minutes to ask God for the grace to recognize Christ's presence in all things. Review the day and notice where you were drawn toward the holy and where you moved further away. Then look toward the next day with the intention to listen more carefully to the Spirit.²

Third, we practice compassion for ourselves and others. We notice and engage the suffering in our community, our neighborhood, our world. Move toward the needs of others and your own longings, sharing what you have and asking for what you need. Seek forgiveness and reconciliation with those you have harmed, intentionally or not. And actively pursue justice and mercy.

We cultivate interior, transformative peace by practicing: awe and gratitude, an unflinching look at the real, and compassion. That is the invitation of the second week of Advent. May we respond with a wholehearted "yes" in our individual lives and as a community. May we nurture God's peace within and share that peace around us. Amen.

² Learn more about this prayer practice here: <https://www.jesuits.org/spirituality/the-ignatian-examen/>.